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Abstract
Among the many contributions he has made to contemporary aesthetics, Arnold Berleant invites us to question the assumptions about aesthetic experience and aesthetic value held dear by adherents to 18th century aesthetic theory in the face of challenges contemporary artists continue to pose by making artworks that test those assumptions. With his concept of aesthetic engagement, Berleant encourages us to embrace a form of life that thrills to the ecstasies of artworks and everyday existence and to glory in our embodiment of "the flesh of the world."

Keywords
Engagement, Embodiment, Aesthetic Field, Aesthetic Experience, Aesthetic Theory, Flesh.

The contributions Arnold Berleant has made to contemporary aesthetics are too often overlooked. These include, but are not limited to, questioning the hegemony of 18th century theory in aesthetics, introducing aesthetic engagement as an alternative to that theory, exploring the environment as a subject for aesthetic appreciation, appealing to phenomenology for a concept of aesthetic embodiment, and founding an on-line, open-access, peer-reviewed journal as an alternative to the official organs of the aesthetics societies in Britain and the United States. Berleant has given us inspired interpretations of music, literature, dance, and cinema insisting that the work of artworks is always an activity performed by the creator and the appreciator, both, not an object isolated from the world with others of its kind, collected and sorted to satisfy the demands of scholarship or the market. Beauty is often the focus of his interests in artworks, the environment, and the quotidian ecstasies of everyday life, and there is, often, a beauty in his way of communicating what interests him about his subjects.

In this appreciation, I focus on the introduction of engagement as an alternative to the dominant 18th century theory in aesthetics and the phenomenology that underwrites his concept of aesthetic embodiment. The latter is really a species of the former and both contain a sustained critique of the influence of Kant in contemporary aesthetics. Where contemporary aestheticians, bound by their 18th century roots, struggle to make sense of contemporary artworks, Berleant sees artists and their creations cutting their connections to those roots and branching out in creative directions. Turning their attention away from art objects toward perceptual consciousness and the conditions that affect it, Berleant says, artists challenge the demand that artworks be distinguishable objects possessing a special status that must be regarded in a unique way. This challenge, he argues, is evident not only in artworks like Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) or John Cage's *4'33"* (1952) but

starting with the Impressionists and in music since the Renaissance.[1] In fact, Berleant contends that 18th century aesthetics was not always discerning about the arts of its time and that it is patently anachronistic when it comes to the arts of our time.

There are two observations present in that claim. First, it might be reasonable to assume that aesthetics, as it emerged in the 18th century, was based on artworks created up to and including that time. As is well known, it was only at the end of the 18th century that the arts were distinguished from one another. Up to and including the formation of 18th century aesthetic theory, the prevailing distinction was between works of the fine arts, produced to exemplify a creative potential free from any utilitarian purpose, and works of the crafts, designed and decorated to be used for such purposes. Among the fine arts, the principal arts were what came to be distinguished as painting and poetry where artists produced works evidently distinguishable from everyday artifacts and affairs. An aesthetics attempting to make sense of these artworks would predictably dedicate itself to discerning what made these works distinctive and what was the best way of appreciating what was distinctive about them. Following a long tradition that preceded them, the 18th century theorists made beauty the quality that distinguished artworks from commonplace artifacts but, in line with a tradition we call the Enlightenment, made that quality an achievement of the properly contemplative regard of an artwork by a sensitive observer.

In the first place, then, 18th century aesthetics strains, says Berleant, to apply a theory based on the appreciation of painting and poetry to the sculpture, architecture, music, theater, and dance from the periods leading up to and including its own. Artworks in the second grouping must be experienced physically, not just cognitively, walking around the sculpture, entering into the building or attending works of the performing arts. Second, when it comes to contemporary art, where painting and poetry do not enjoy such a privileged status (except, perhaps, among a few traditional art historians and critics), an aesthetics based on isolating objects, however transfigured from commonplace artifacts, said to be distinguished by a beauty attributable to the contemplative regard of a properly sensitive observer is evidently out of its element. Of the innumerable available examples, one Berleant would likely appreciate is the suite of canvases painted by Mark Rothko and installed in the Houston chapel that bears the painter's name.

There are fourteen large, black but blue paintings in the eight-sided chapel, triptychs on three walls and single paintings on five, illuminated by interior lighting and by a narrow skylight. The paintings cannot be isolated from the chapel for which they were commissioned. They are not traditionally beautiful. And to appreciate them, you must enter the chapel and sit with them for an extended time through changes in the lighting, and adjustments of your eyes to the lighting, at different times of day, at different times of year, in different weather conditions, modifying the daylight streaming in from the transom and bringing out the variations of blue on black that makes each painting different from the next and makes a varying whole of the paintings collected at the site. You

appreciate the paintings not just by seeing them but also, importantly, by feeling the shifting affect at the site as people come and go, some just curious tourists, others dedicated visitors who meditate, some in lotus poses, their eyes closed, or who come to practice some other spiritual exercise, while you sit basking in your own admiration.

So, what have artists discovered that, by his lights, so many philosophers of art have not? Berleant calls it "aesthetic engagement." Under this heading he advances three main provisions that counter what he identifies as the three main tenets of traditional aesthetics. Where traditional aesthetics starts by isolating an object for aesthetic appreciation, Berleant recommends an attention to the *situations* where we find aesthetic experiences. These situations may include distinguishable objects but also may not. What they must include for the alternative model of aesthetics Berleant has in mind is a unified field of experience where such objects may or may not turn up. In this field, Berleant expects to find the interacting forces of perceivers, creators, objects or events, and performances "affected by social institutions, historical traditions, cultural forms and practices, technological developments in materials and techniques and other such contextual conditions" which animate the field and bring it to life.[2] Artworks and forms of life experienced aesthetically turn up for us, Berleant insists, in a context and are inseparable from their context.

In that context, what Berleant calls "the aesthetic field,"[3] there are complex lines of *continuity* to be explored "between artists and the social, historical and cultural factors that influence the kinds and uses of art, between aesthetic experience and the full breadth of human experience, between perceptual awareness and the range of meanings, associations, memories, and imagination that penetrate perception, between a dwelling in the aesthetic situation and the broader social and personal uses of art."[4] The work of artists and the aesthetic experience of audiences are, thus, integrated into the full range of human existence. They cannot be separated from the world where they emerge nor can they be distinguished by a quality, beauty, say, achieved by the properly contemplative regard of a refined observer. Whatever is remarkable about the work of artists and the aesthetic experience of audiences will be continuous with the world where they emerge demanding a different style of appreciation.

That style of appreciation is the substance of Berleant's "*aesthetic engagement*." This engagement thrives on the active character of aesthetic appreciation and what Berleant calls the "essentially participatory" nature of such appreciations.[5] Only the active exploration of the lines of continuity mapping the aesthetic field can begin to appreciate the artwork or an aesthetic experience in its situated richness. Only the active following of the lines connecting the artwork or experience to the forces at play in their situatedness can appreciate what is properly aesthetic about an artwork or experience. There is nothing disinterested about this engagement. Engagement does not just take an interest in an artwork. It takes part in it. It brings it to fruition as is demanded by so much of the work of artists in our times. Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1963) is a good example as is Christo and

Jeanne-Claude's *Gates* (2005). In the first, we are asked to select the order of the chapters to form a narrative from the text. In the second, we are asked to walk through the "gates," draped and parted fabric hung on a series of frames erected along paved paths in New York's Central Park, in the company of others, to be observed from the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a second interactive artwork. So, situation, continuity and engagement are Berleant's answers to the standard practice of isolating objects possessing a special status to be regarded with disinterested satisfaction.

Aesthetic engagement was conceived to counter mainstream thinking in the philosophy of art. That mainstream takes as its source Kant's critical philosophy and especially the thought, promoted by Kant, that aesthetic experience was a cognitive affair measured by the standard of disinterestedness. Berleant bristled at this idea. In his Presidential Address to the International Association for Aesthetics, Berleant cites Nietzsche, who writes, "Kant, like all philosophers, just considered art and beauty from the position of the 'spectator,' instead of viewing the aesthetic problem through the experiences of the artist (the creator), and thus inadvertently introduced the 'spectator' himself into the concept 'beautiful.' I just wish this 'spectator' had been sufficiently known to the philosophers of beauty! – I mean as a great *personal* fact and experience, as a fund of strong personal experiences, desires, surprises and pleasures in the field of beauty! ... Kant said, 'Something is beautiful if it gives pleasure *without interest*.'[6] Without interest!"[7] Nietzsche goes on to reference Stendhal who called beauty *une promesse de bonheur*.[8] With Nietzsche, Berleant seeks to turn our attention to the work of artists who fashion and situate what affords audiences who actively engage them properly aesthetic experiences, pleasures and happiness.

No doubt his training in music helped point Berleant toward this specific alternative to traditional aesthetics. In music, the performer is always present with the work, and that performer must be actively engaged in making music for *music* to be realized and not just a sequence of tones composed to be heard in terms of shared cultural expectations. As the performer plays music, she is also actively listening to the music she is playing and, as Nietzsche suggests, she listens with her muscles, tapping her toe to mark the time, cocking her ear attentively, nodding her head with approval, swaying her torso with the affect of the tune.[9] The musician engages her body in response to the music she hears the better to engage her body in making the music plays. She is actively engaged in making music at the same time as she is actively engaged in aesthetically appreciating the music she makes. Perhaps Eduard Hanslick listened to music with a detached, disinterested satisfaction, but there is no record of Hanslick making music whereas with Nietzsche, and Berleant, there is. The art of music demands engaged attention in the performance of it and in listening to it, otherwise it is just a background pumped in to fill an ostensibly empty space.

Given his expressed commitments to engagement and, as we have just noted, the role of the body in that engagement, we are not surprised by Berleant's turning to aesthetic embodiment.[10] Embodiment, for Berleant, is not reducible to the body that would be a vessel for the cognitive state

ordinarily associated with aesthetic experience. There is no room in Berleant's appreciation of aesthetics and the arts for substance dualism. Rather, there is, in Berleant's sense of embodiment, the body as a subtle continuum of thinking and being, a corporeal mindfulness that blends the mental and the physical. He cites Tantric Buddhism where the body *is* the embodiment of "corporeality, affectivity, cognitivity, and spirituality whose layers are subtly interwoven and mutually interactive."[11] In the Western tradition, he cites his own work on embodiment in music, especially in an appreciation of Claude Debussy's Prelude for the piano, "La Cathédrale engloutie," which, he says, makes the sunken cathedral present in "the stately progression of chords built on the interval of a fifth and their bell-like resonance."[12] He also refers, here, to the poetic question posed by William Butler Yeats, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"[13] His commitments to aesthetic embodiment will often lead Berleant to write about dance.[14]

Berleant brought out *Art and Engagement* the same year Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch published *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*.[15] Where Varela, Thompson and Rosch aimed to transform thinking in the philosophy of mind, Berleant sought to develop an intuition about aesthetic experience he first introduced almost twenty-five years earlier in "The Experience and Criticism of Art."[16] Ironically, since these studies have very different goals, both draw generously from the phenomenology of perception. For Varela, Thompson and Rosch, perception is an achievement, and this achievement would be expressed decades later as enactivism in cognitive science. For Berleant, perception is an invitation to engage artworks as a vital resource for human being, and, decades later, he would express that engagement as aesthetic embodiment.

The phenomenology of perception in both cases is drawn from the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty did more than any other Western philosopher to argue for embodiment, beginning with his *Phenomenology of Perception* and ending with his last writing published posthumously as *The Visible and the Invisible*.[17] Already in the *Phenomenology*, which so inspired Varela, Thompson and Rosch and, later, the enactivism of Shaun Gallagher, Merleau-Ponty describes the body as *the* locus of intelligibility and compares the unity of the body to the unity of an artwork.[18] In *Art and Engagement*, Berleant references the *Phenomenology* to account for a continuity between perceivers and objects that is consistent with the physics of relativity theory that corrects the classical view of visual space assumed by 18th century aesthetic theory. In a text from the *Phenomenology* Berleant cites, Merleau-Ponty writes, "My point of view is for me much less a limitation on my experience than a way of inserting myself into the world in its entirety."[19] Space is not, then, a Euclidean volume where a perceiver discovers objects. It is a continuity of perceivers, objects and the connections between them that form an environment or a world.

On this view, there are several different worlds formed by the different perceivers and objects and connections that populate them each with a distinct "style," a distinct way of determining what belongs in that world and how its constituents hang together. At the same time, our "point of view"

has a style given a context by the functions of our body, and we insert ourselves into a world by adapting the style of our embodied point of view to the style of that world. Aesthetic engagement is an embodied point of view that inserts itself into a world of artworks and everyday experience. Citing the notoriously difficult "Working Notes" from *The Visible and the Invisible*, Berleant associates this embodied point of view with a "charged field," an energy reaching outward from the body that is no longer a container whose boundaries must be breached but an overfullness of force that cannot be contained. No longer bound by the limits of a body, aesthetic embodiment intertwines us in what Merleau-Ponty calls "the flesh of the world."[20]

Aesthetic embodiment, then, is not just for Berleant an overfullness of this or that body but an enfolding of corporeality, affectivity, consciousness, and spirit that is local with you or me but that also covers the environment we share. "This means," Merleau-Ponty writes, "that my body is made of the same flesh as the world …and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world *reflects* it, encroaches upon it, and it encroaches upon the world."[21] Berleant embraces this view, and, so, aesthetic embodiment is, for him, a way of actively and intimately engaging with artworks, with others, and with the world where we find artworks and other forms of life. With this view of embodiment, aesthetics itself is a form of life actively exploring the lines of continuity connecting the work of artists and the experience afforded audiences in contexts defined by the creative forces of perceivers and performers, objects and events unfolding across the full range of human life.

Now, accepting this ontology, is Berleant guilty of the charges he brings against mainstream aesthetics? Has he conceived an aesthetics based in 20th century philosophy and science that is anachronistic in the consideration of works created at a time when artworks appeared to be distinctive and isolated from everyday artifacts and Euclidean geometry ruled the conditions for producing perspective in painting? Berleant would likely respond that the general theory of relativity corrects the account of perception held by 18th century theorists and that we are justified in reconsidering that outmoded account in our appreciation of artworks created in our time and in times past. He would also likely point out that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception is prescient of the latest developments in the philosophy of mind that correct for a substance dualism we should never have adopted and would do well to drop. He would no doubt insist that the 18th century theorists were wrong to isolate artworks from the contexts in which they emerged, as recent developments in art history have shown, that appreciations of artworks from the point of view of a disinterested spectator mistake what is of value in the work of artists, then and now, and that beauty and the sublime do not exhaust what is distinctive about artworks or remarkable forms of life.

Finally, when we overlook what Arnold Berleant has contributed to contemporary aesthetics, we miss the opportunity to question assumptions about aesthetic experience and aesthetic value that are held dear in the face of challenges that artists continue to pose by making works that make trouble for those assumptions. The recent collaborative work by Matthew Barney, "Catasterism in Three

Movements" (2021), new movies by Ryusuke Hamaguchi, "Drive My Car" (2021), for example, Pharoah Sanders performing "Promises" (2021) with the London Symphony Orchestra strings as well as renewed appreciation of drawings by Cézanne (Museum of Modern Art, June through September 2021) all point to the importance of considering aesthetic engagement as an alternative to detached observation in the enjoyment and understanding of the work of artists in our time and in times past.[22] And, with aesthetic embodiment, Berleant gives us another way to think about what Michel Foucault calls an aesthetics of existence. Where Foucault encourages us to give form to our life with ascetic practices, Berleant invites us to embrace a form of life that thrills to the ecstasies afforded by artworks and everyday existence and to glory in our embodiment of the flesh of the world.

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[1] Arnold Berleant, "The Historicity of Aesthetics," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 26, nos. 2 and 3 (Spring and Summer 1986) revised and reprinted in *Re-Thinking Aesthetics: Rouge Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* (New York: Routledge 2016), 29. All citations are to the revised text.
[2] Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 49.
[3] *Ibid.* Also see Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field: A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Springfield, IL: C. C. Thomas, 1970).
[4] "The Historicity of Aesthetics," 35.
[5] "The Historicity of Aesthetics," 35.
[6] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, § 2.
[7] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Third Essay, § 6. See Arnold Berleant, "Re-Thinking Aesthetics," in *Re-Thinking Aesthetics*, 15, citing Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. F. Golffing (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), Third Essay, § 6.
[8] Stendhal, *De L'Amour*, chapter xvii.
[9] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 809.
[10] Arnold Berleant, "Aesthetic Embodiment," in *Re-Thinking Aesthetics*, 83-90, from an address at the annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, San Francisco, 2003.
[11] "Aesthetic Embodiment," 83, citing Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 11.
[12] Aesthetic Embodiment," 84, citing Arnold Berleant, "Musical Embodiment," *Journal of Cultural Studies* 5 (Summer 2001), 7-22.
[13] Aesthetic Embodiment," 85, citing William Butler Yeats, "Among School Children" in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan Press, 1958), 245.
[14] See, most recently, "Aesthetic Engagement in Video Dance" in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Dance and Philosophy*, ed. Rebecca L. Farinas and Julie van Camp (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 330-335.
[15] Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (MIT Press, 1991).
[16] Arnold Berleant, "The Experience and Criticism of Art," *Sarah Lawrence Journal* (Winter 1967): 55-64.
[17] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012) and *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).
[18] *Phenomenology of Perception*, 152-153 and *passim*.
[19] *Phenomenology of Perception*, 345. *Art and Engagement*, 61, cites the Colin Smith translation (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1962), 329.
[20] "Aesthetic Embodiment," 86, citing *The Visible and the Invisible*, 267.
[21] "Aesthetic Embodiment," 87, citing *The Visible and the Invisible*, 248.
[22] See Jason Farago, "The Cézanne We've Forgotten to See," *New Yaork Times*, June 27, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/27/arts/design/cezanne-moma-drawings.html, accessed 12 December 2021.